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ABSTRACT

More courses in the relatively new area of organizational communication should be offered because the subject matter is transdisciplinary in scope, method, and application, and the area holds promise for contributing to the advancement of knowledge and the possible unification of the sciences. Such courses can explain the communication processes by which people organize themselves, instill an awareness of the importance of communication, and develop in students the abilities to set goals, seek opportunities, and solve problems. The four types of strategies for an undergraduate course in organizational communication are recruitment, instruction, curriculum, and placement. (JM)

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THE UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES

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THE UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES

An undergraduate came to me and said, "I want a course that will prepare me for a job." I said, "Is that all?" The undergraduate said, "I want a program of study that will prepare me for a career." I said, "Is that all?" The undergraduate said, "I want an education that will prepare me for life." I said, "Okay."

The above interchange illustrates the basic components of a student centered rationale for offering organizational communication. In a large measure that rationale is, "Give the students what they want." It is a viable rationale, however, only when the student is behaving as an intelligent consumer of educational services. Specifically, in 1975 the job market is tight and many students are apprehensive about finding work. This is an understandable reaction to an unpleasant situation. However, a great number of students are approaching the situation in a short-sighted manner. They demand immediate vocational training. In organizational communication (-type) courses they often get it. For example, one course in interviewing/technical writing/negotiating/copywriting/public relations/speech writing is often enough for the student to get a job as an interviewer/technical writer/etc. We can (and do and should) offer courses that give students marketable entry level skills. The danger in doing so is that these kinds of jobs are dead end jobs. The student goes out, gets a job, and two years later is bored stiff. Who's fault is it? The student of course had the responsibility for intelligent consumption, but that doesn't absolve us. If we are going to offer vocational courses we must (like the bars) reserve the right to refuse service. Obviously as educators we can't simply deny students access to certain courses, nor in these times of declining enrollments do we

want to. Our option is to include a warning, "CAUTION, the long term occupational opportunities in_____are poor without additional training!" If students persist in ignoring the warning then stronger measures (prerequisites, linked courses, etc.) are needed.

RATIONALE. Offering vocational-type organizational communication courses prepares students for jobs.

Of course, if we are going to include a warning advising additional training, we must be ready to offer courses that provide additional training. The key word in that sentence is "additional." Too often the reaction to the advice "Offer more courses," is to offer more of the same. The student who takes four/five/six different courses which prepares him/her for four/five/six different entry level jobs has a short term advantage, but the same long term disadvantage. (S)He may simply have the option of choosing from among several dead end jobs. Developing programs of study that will prepare students for careers in communication demands both effort and individualization. For example, it is fairly easy to enumerate the kinds of jobs available to an interviewer, but where do those jobs lead? We should encourage our students to look beyond the first job. This requires a certain amount of career planning - something that a student oriented towards the here and now may not understand (Note: The Question, "What do you want to be doing in five years?", still perplexes students). If the student decides to eventually go into research, we may suggest a program of study that includes survey research, research methods, statistics, audience analysis, communication management, etc. The point is not that we should direct students, but that we should help them to find directions and then we should prepare them to proceed on their own.

RATIONALE. Offering career counseling and advanced organizational communication courses prepares students for careers.

If someone were to impliment the implicit advice of this discussion (up to now), the result would be a curriculum for educating specialists. Most departments do not have the resources to offer a number of career tracks and would be forced to concentrate. That is neither necessary nor desirable. Communication is a specialized field only at the entry level. The advanced courses in organizational communication can do multiple service. For example, there is no reason for the typical department to offer multiple introductory research courses (Research in Organizational Communication, Research in Interpersonal Communication, Research in Mass Communication, etc.). Offer one research course with built in flexibility for the student to make individual applications. Despite student wishes for specialization and professionalization there is no good justification for narrow concentration on the undergraduate level. The most common complaint about students trained in areas that do specialize on the undergraduate level (eg. engineering, accounting) is that they do not have the bredth of understanding to cope with constant and changing problems.

RATIONALE. Offering general communication courses prepares students for flexible futures.

The rationale for the undergraduate course in organizational communication developed so far has been strictly student centered, but there is another side that deserves mention. Many departments need to increase their enrollments, offering courses in organizational communication may be a way of tapping sources of students not otherwise available. A word of caution is important. Several universities have had the experience that the first time(s) O.C. courses are offered they attract from other department courses rather than from other departments or undecided majors. There is no guarantee that O.C. courses will increase total department enrollments (unless these courses are required by other departments).

Even without the lure of additional students there are some very good reasons for an instructor to offer courses in organizational communication. First, the area is relatively new so fresh perspectives are welcome and the opportunity to make significant contributions is great. Second, the subject matter is important (relevant?). We are affected by the communication networks of our own organizations, the communication campaigns of other organizations, and the output of the communications industry. Third, the subject matter is interesting (in part because of one and two). Fourth, teaching is a good base for research in a wide open area. Fifth, teaching is a good base for consulting. Sixth, perhaps most important, O.C. is a part of the wave of the future. It is a body of knowledge that is transdisciplinary in scope, method, and application. It is an area that holds great promise for contributing to the advancement of knowledge and possible unification of the sciences.

I tried several times to explain the objectives for an undergraduate course in organizational communication. I was not satisfied with the results. Let me offer the following instead.

I TEACH ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

"Hi, my name's Bill Dally."
"My pleasure, Bill. I'm Don Rogers."
"I'm in real estate, Don. What do you do?"
"I teach organizational communication."
"What's that?"

That (organizational communication) is a vocation, in the religious sense of the word.

I teach ORGANIZATIONAL because the need for order is basic to the human race.

I teach COMMUNICATION because the need to share is basic to me.

I try to explain the communication processes by which people organize themselves to achieve individual and collective goals, I try to explain the communication processes by which people attempt to maintain the organizations they create. I try to explain the communication processes by which people in an organization attempt to influence other people not in the organization. (Cognitive Objectives)

I try to instill in my students a sense of the importance of communication in life. I try to instill in my students some of the values of openness, honesty, trust, acceptance, and empathy which can make organizations more effective. I try to instill in my students a respect for freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of information, and privacy. (Affective Objectives)

I try to develop in my students the abilities to set goals, to seek opportunities, to resolve problems, and to solve problems. I try to develop in my students the abilities to plan, to make decisions, to act, and to evaluate their actions. I try to develop in my students the ability to listen, to seek information, to persuade, to inform, to discuss, and to fight for what they believe in. (Behavioral Objectives)

I teach organizational communication.

I do something I like.

I do something I'm proud of.

I do something worthwhile.

I teach ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION.

The final section of this paper deals with strategies for the undergraduate course in organizational communication. Four types of strategies are considered: Recruitment, Instruction, Curriculum, and Placement.

Recruitment Strategies. In times of declining enrollments the recruitment of students can be a matter of life and death (both) for a department. Courses in organizational communication can be structured to meet the needs of other departments. The idea is to offer courses that other departments will require their students to take. The most likely candidates (based on expressions of need and past experience) are business administration, engineering and applied sciences, health sciences - especially nursing, occupational therapy, and hospital administration, educational administration, social sciences - especially clinical psychology, social work, and speech pathology, and physical education. A second strategy is to determine if other departments are offering courses that they don't want to be offering; English often offers courses in business communication that they don't want, psychology and social work may not want to teach interviewing, speech or journalism often teach advertising because no one else will. The idea is that if another department has a course (or several) that your department would like to be teaching, find out if they would be willing to turn the course over to you. A third strategy for recruiting students is simply to take out an ad in the local campus newspaper describing your course offerings. To some extent these recruitment strategies may be unnecessary. There are not that many areas of study which prepare B.A. students for jobs. Once word spreads of a job/career prepatory major recruitment may not be a problem.

Instruction Strategies. The core element in any instructional strategy for organizational communication is the progressive movement away from the classroom as a/the learning environment. This same strategy fits both the single course

and the multiple course program. A typical pattern would begin in the classroom moving from lecture to laboratory to case study to structured field experience to internship. Instruction in O.C. needs to blend theory with applications. The theory is the base from which the student may explore individualized interests. Applications of theory to problem situations may take place in the classroom laboratory as role-played assignments (conduct an interview, write a memo, etc.) or case study discussions (what would you do in the circumstances?). It is desirable, however, that instruction in O.C. not be confined to the classroom. In any community there are many opportunities to study organizational communication in action. Students can help local politicians with campaigns (writing press releases, writing speeches, interviewing voters). Students can analyze the organization, output, and impact of local media (radio, T.V., newspapers). Students can be the field agents in faculty originated research projects. The Division IV Audit project, for example, has many opportunities for students to gain experiences as questionnaire administrators, interviewers, data analysts, report writers, etc. Your own campus probably has a number of administrators charged with communication responsibilities, many of whom would be willing to accept a student observer/shadow/intern for a term.

Curricular Strategies. The easiest tendency in an area like organizational communication is to confuse a course with curriculum. Offering one course in O.C. gives the student an additional option within a department, but seldom prepares the student to meet job/career objectives. In general, however, it is not difficult to develop a curriculum in O.C. that relies on existing offerings. Students accepted into an O.C. major (or whatever it's called) should have (1) a broad foundation in the liberal arts and humanities, (2) general knowledge of the applied social sciences (economics, management, government, education, etc.),

and (3) specific courses in communication theory and behavior and organizational theory and behavior. The ideal curriculum in O.C. would involve four courses. First, a basic introductory/survey/theory course to acquaint students with opportunities, directions, concepts, and principles of organizational communication, would be offered to sophomores/juniors. Second, one or more practicum courses should be offered to sophomores/juniors to develop specific skills in the spoken, print, and telecommunication media. This type of practicum course should not be too heavily weighted towards one medium. For example, a presentations course in which the student prepares a written report, a presentation manuscript, audio-visual supporting materials, and finally delivers the oral report would be better that either the traditional public speaking or report writing course. Third, an applications course providing opportunities to observe organizations, to conduct field research, to analyze and discuss communication problems, etc. should be offered to juniors/seniors. These internships could be of any length from two weeks to a year. Courses one and two may be taken co-currently. Courses one and two should be prerequisites for course three. Course three should be a prerequisite for course four. In the typical department there are probably existing courses that could fill the requirements of courses two and three. Communication departments already offer communication skills courses and advanced analytic courses. The only curricular changes that would be required in most cases would be the adoption of courses one and four and some modification of existing courses to better meet the O.C. needs expressed in courses two and three.

Placement Strategies. In the long run there may be the most important strategies for the O.C. program. The first step in a comprehensive placement strategy is to make students aware of job and career opportunities in communication

(i.e. entry level jobs tend to be either as technicians - writers, producers, editors, etc. - or as agents - interviewers, recruiters, negotiators (buying and selling), spokesperson, etc. Advancement tends to be into management, training, research, and consulting). Once aware students should be encouraged to think about and plan their careers. This can be treated like the planning stage of a communication campaign. Third, students should be taught how to write cover letters requesting interviews, how to write a resume, how to be interviewed, how to interview the interviewer, how to negotiate salary, travel, etc. All of this material can be integrated into courses in interviewing or communication campaigns. Finally, beat the bushes for your students. Go to local recruiters, company personnel department placement agencies, communication organizations. Tell them to come to you when they are looking for employees because you have a continuing supply of well educated human beings. You will.